

Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition



Robert Siegel Jr., or “Sieg,” was born in the Bayview neighborhood of Milwaukee in 1925 and lives in Mequon. He is a wooden shoe or “klompen” maker.

Married to a second-generation Dutch-American with family in the largely Dutch community of Pella, Iowa, Bob comes by his devotion to Dutch traditions through marriage – and by a fascination with old tools. An avid antique tool collector, Sieg acquired a set of wooden shoemaking tools in 1969, which set him on a path to become a maker himself. He was able to observe demonstrations of wooden shoe carving at the annual tulip festival in Pella, and study with a master carver employed at the local wooden shoe factory in Holland, Michigan. His deepest learning came

through three weeks of study with master klompen makers in various regions of the Netherlands in the 1970s.

Sieg carves shoes in various sizes, including miniature. He demonstrates the craft at many Dutch-American events in the Upper Midwest and beyond. When he first started he would often encounter elders who had worn wooden shoes growing up on Wisconsin farms, typically made by a neighbor. Today the shoes are more a symbol of ethnic identity than actual footwear.

Sieg uses aspen (popple) to carve his shoes. He generally buys whole logs, then saws and splits them into chunks of the right size for an individual shoe. An average tree yields about 75 pair. At his fastest, Sieg could hand carve a shoe from a log section in 28 minutes, using only 3 traditional tools: a side axe/hewing axe, block knife, and spoon auger. Speed is important to making wooden shoes without cracks.

Sieg had been searching unsuccessfully for an appropriate and motivated apprentice for many years until Luke Traver approached him at Old World Wisconsin. Sieg found the potential he had been looking for in Luke. The first step in their apprenticeship was Luke making a workbench for himself from a log. Along with carving, Sieg also taught Luke how to sharpen tools, where to get the right kind of wood for the shoes, where to find the necessary tools, how to properly fit a shoe, more about the history of klompen, and tips for conducting engaging public presentations. They made 20 presentations to the public during the course of the apprenticeship including at the Cedar Grove Hollandfest and Little Chute Kermis Dutch Fest. Luke is eager to continue to learn and share this ethnic tradition.

“I finally found someone who can continue it.” - Robert Siegel Jr.